

Belgian Opinion on the Congo
Question.

THE Belgian Chamber will shortly be called upon to give its decision as to the annexation of the Congo, a decision pressed for by England in order that Belgium may put an end to the abuses which have aroused English public opinion against the Government of King Leopold's African colony. This is the first time since Belgium obtained her independence that any vote of her Parliament has had international importance or interested foreign opinion. It may, therefore, be useful to endeavour to consider under what conditions and in what spirit the decision will be arrived at. The political circumstances of Belgium are simple enough and are very well known; but the question is so novel and so full of difficulties, and comes before the nation in circumstances so abnormal, that outside observers may very likely be deceived as to the state of public opinion in Belgium, and it is worth while, for their sakes, to examine the subject somewhat closely, in order to remove misunderstanding, and show things as they really are.

The British Government, yielding to an intense movement of public opinion, invites Belgium to take over the Congo in order to effect the necessary reforms. It believes itself to be also handling judiciously Belgian susceptibilities; but in this it is mistaken. Its action in the matter, coupled with the ringing speeches of ministers in the House of Commons and elsewhere, has wounded these susceptibilities, and has given an opportunity for that portion of the Belgian press which is systematically devoted to the Congo State to represent England as seeking to pick a quarrel with King Leopold, not in order to obtain reforms for the benefit of the natives and the commercial freedom guaranteed by the Act of Berlin, but in order to possess herself of the Congo, or at least

to partition it and secure for herself a share which would enable her to carry through the Cape to Cairo railway on British soil. The defenders of the African policy of the King have reminded the Belgians of the Transvaal business, and have tried in every way to excite among the Belgians feelings of distrust and hostility towards England. Belgians in general have nothing but sympathy for England, all the more because they know that she is the natural protector of their neutrality, and that her foreign policy has no other objects than peace and free trade, which are the basis of their own prosperity. They recognise also in England the model for Parliamentary countries, and, although they have not the same continual and intimate relations with their insular neighbours that they have with the French, Belgian Liberals entertain lively feelings of sympathy with English Liberals. When Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman came into power, the Liberal Left deputies in the Belgian Chamber sent him an address of congratulation. But the intervention of England in the affairs of the Congo has undoubtedly been looked upon by most Belgians with great distrust and no little resentment. They have looked at it in the very light in which the British Government did not want them to look at it, as an unfriendly interference in the domestic affairs of Belgium. On all sides it has been reiterated that such interference could not be tolerated, and that Congo affairs were a matter for Belgians, a matter to be dealt with by Belgians amongst themselves, independently of all foreign intervention. The bulk of the Belgian press systematically defends the views of the Congo State—that is to say, the views of the King—or else contents itself with inserting the *communiqués* of the Press Bureau. That Bureau was established by the Congo State, and has been justly denounced in the Belgian Chamber as an agency for corruption and for the poisoning of the public mind. It has taken advantage of the complaints from England to organise a regular campaign against Britain, and to represent that the protests of English opinion against the Congo abuses are nothing but the interested libels of the “Merchants of Liverpool.” They meet everything with this stereotyped reply and when Belgians, from a sense of humanity and national honour, join in denouncing the abuses, their fellow countrymen remain sceptical, or even reproach them as dupes, if not accomplices, of the merchants of Liverpool. It is just possible that the mere fact of writing this article may bring down this reproach on my head. Only yesterday, M. Hennebieg, one of the chief apologists for the King’s policy, wrote to a Brussels paper as follows:—“Together with the fate of “one of the richest colonies in the world, our own independence “and future are at stake. Among the Powers who signed the

"Act of Berlin, England, in spite of whom this international enterprise was undertaken, is pursuing a policy destructive of the whole of the work started in 1884, and of that which represents it, the Congo State. Germany opposes this, and defends the work. We, who are the stake in this conflict, are caught and carried along in this strife of nations." And a great number of the defenders of the King's Congo policy say under their breath what M. Hennebieg proclaims from the house-top: Belgium must treat England as an enemy, and work along with Germany against her. The formidable fortifications constructed at Antwerp may, at need, serve as a threat to England, instead of as a foothold for an English army coming to maintain the neutrality of Belgium.

The exaggeration of these wild remarks is obvious. But it is none the less a very serious matter that they should have been uttered, and such a state of things could only have been brought about by the profound ignorance and, consequently, as I will explain, the extraordinary indifference which characterises Belgian public opinion in all that concerns the affairs of the Congo. The Belgian public knows nothing about the Congo. And everything has been done to secure that it should be so. But it is very extraordinary that when the report of the Commission of Inquiry, sent to the Congo by the King as a result of English protests, confirmed by official declarations the reality of the abuses which had been denounced in England, and of the unrestrained exploitation of native labour which had been the fatal cause of these abuses, the report seemed to pass without notice in Belgium, and its statements produced only very mild emotion. The truth is that the mass of the Belgian public take no interest whatever in colonial affairs. They have never been in the habit of doing so, and have always considered the Congo enterprise as a private business of the King's, which had nothing to do with Belgium. It was indeed under these conditions that the King was authorised by the Belgian Chamber in 1885 to become sovereign of the Congo. M. Beernaert, at that time head of the Government, took care to make a solemn declaration that the Congo should be to Belgium an entirely foreign State, and that Belgium should never be involved in its affairs, either diplomatic, military or financial. Since then the King has been allowed to requisition a large number of Belgian officers in order to turn them into agents for the Congo State, to employ in the service of the Congo a great many Belgian public servants and diplomatists, and at various times to solicit on behalf of the Independent State the financial intervention of Belgium. And he has not been interfered with. But when the question arose in 1895 of uniting the fortunes of Belgium with those of the Congo by annexation, a scheme

put forward by the Government of M. de Burlet in order to extricate the Congo State from the financial embarrassment which it had got into owing to the Arab war, there was such an outcry of public opinion that the Government had to withdraw the project.

It was then that the Congo State, obliged to meet its expenses out of its own resources, began the system of conceding commercial monopolies and the practice of excessive exploitation of native labour. This resulted in splendid commercial profits for the King and his associates, the extent and suddenness of which drew a considerable number of partisans to the side of the Congo policy, especially in Antwerp and Brussels. The Belgians, who are above all men of business, began to say to one another that there was perhaps money to be made in the Congo, but there were very few who stopped to consider by what means the money had been made, and whether a civilised State could for any length of time make use of such means. But to the mind of the King, the chief result of this prosperity of the Congo revenues was to give him a keen desire to keep in his own hands the uncontrolled administration of a business which appeared to be prospering, and he thenceforth abandoned the idea of annexing the Congo to Belgium, which would have put an end to his free disposal of the resources of the State—a State of which he was, according to M. Beernaert's expression, "as absolute a sovereign as Louis XIV. was of France." At the same time a certain number of political men who were in a better position than the mass of the public to acquaint themselves with what was going on in the Congo, and also men of business whose interests had been hurt by the exactions of the monopolies, came to the conclusion that the only means of putting an end to the extravagances resulting from the colonial autocracy of the King was to annex the Congo to Belgium. Belgium had a right to annex in 1901, in virtue of a convention passed in 1890 by M. Beernaert with the Independent State. When M. Beernaert, in 1901, proposed to exercise this right, the King indignantly protested, and wrote to M. Woeste, a personal enemy of M. Beernaert and his rival in the leadership of the Catholic party, that "the worst enemies of the Congo were those who sought immediate annexation." The matter was therefore let alone, and the Government of M. de Smet de Naeyer, in order to gain time, declared that before taking over the Congo it would be necessary to pass colonial legislation, and then to arrange the details of the annexation. He proceeded to draw up a Colonial Bill which he must have known was absolutely unacceptable, since it comprised pure and simple consecration after annexation of the existing absolutism of the King in the Congo. The Government, however, had only put this forward as a matter of form, and took no pains to bring on its

discussion in the Chamber. The Parliamentary Commission charged to examine into it took five years to get constituted and hold one sitting. This was significant enough. In the meantime the exploitation of negro labour yielded more and more brilliant results ; but the protests in England became more and more bitter ; and as they finally culminated in a demand on the part of England that the Congo should be annexed to Belgium, it became necessary, whilst proclaiming no surrender to English injunctions, to work a little more seriously at the annexation question, or at least to appear to work at it. The Parliamentary Commission met, examined the Colonial Bill, made a few alterations on minor points, but preserved the absolutism, deciding that the King should have full executive and legislative power in the Congo after the annexation as before, and that he alone should regulate the budget and the accounts without interference from Parliament. As for the rights of the natives, whose existence was not even mentioned in the original Bill, the Commission clearly showed with what ignorance this question is approached in Belgium. M. Beernaert had proposed to borrow from the Dutch colonial law a series of declarations recognising the elementary rights of man for the natives. The Commission rejected them as a whole, without condescending to examine into them, and satisfied themselves with the adoption of a proposition that there must be a Commission in the Congo appointed by the King, whose duty it would be to watch over native interests—a Commission, indeed, which has been in existence ten years, and has been of no use at all. I do not even know whether it has met more than once. The Belgians, to this day, know nothing, and refuse to know anything about the ill-treatment of the natives on the Congo. For this reason the English Government seems to be a prey to a singular delusion, when it expects that an annexation forced on Belgium will lead to the amelioration of the lot of the natives and to reforms which it has not been able to obtain from the Congo State.

The Belgians do not believe in the abuses pointed out by England. They are ignorant of them. How can they be expected to interest themselves keenly in their suppression ? They have not even been told that the annexation of the Congo has only been proposed because the English Government demanded it. It would be to admit that they were giving way before an English demand, and the tactics of the partisans of the King's policy seem to be to hold themselves in reserve in order, eventually, to rouse Belgian susceptibilities against the second English demand, from which the attention of the Belgian public has also been carefully diverted : England demands that Belgium shall annex the Congo, in order that Belgium may carry out the reforms in the Congo which the Indepen-

dent State has not been willing to effect. Now these reforms will be costly, and the Belgians, who will have to pay, have not been warned by anyone hitherto that, far from bringing them in treasure, the Congo, if they wish to avoid a conflict with England, is at first going to cost them 15 or 20 millions of francs a year. In fact, the Congo budget amounts at present to 37 millions of francs, 27 of which are produced directly or indirectly by forced labour. And again, the greater part of the revenue goes to military expenses. Everything still remains to be done on the Congo. M. de Smet de Naeyer (possibly, indeed, with the object of disgusting the Belgians with the annexation which he proposed, but of which he knew the King was no partisan) said one day in the Chamber, that to equip the Congo would require the expenditure of hundreds of millions, perhaps a milliard of francs. Forced labour once suppressed, where is it to be found? If, after the annexation, the King remains absolute sovereign of the Congo, as the Government proposes, and if the Congolese and Belgian finances are kept strictly separate, quite independently of his own preferences and of the traditions of Congo administration the necessities of the budget will require the least possible change in the present system. And if the Belgian Parliament considered itself called upon to take over the effective control of the colony, things would hardly be any better from the point of view of reform, since the reforms would cost money to Belgium. The Belgian Parliament is, in fact, elected by tax-paying Belgians. Its members will naturally be much more anxious about the sentiments of the electors than about the happiness of the negroes and the moral obligations of colonial policy; and the electors will be far more anxious to keep down their taxes than to ameliorate the lot of the blacks in Central Africa, more especially as the Belgian electors were never consulted as to whether it suited them to have an empire in Africa, or even any colonial policy at all.

No one in Belgium had ever thought of straying into the paths of colonial policy, and if the King had not personally taken the initiative, such policy would have found no supporters. Belgium, without colonies, has attained an unheard-of degree of material prosperity. Compared with her territory and her population, her industrial and commercial activity is three times that of England; and even from the point of view of the actual figures of commercial exchanges she is only surpassed by England, the United States, and Germany, and barely by France. The total amount of the foreign trade of Belgium last year was ten milliards of francs, of which the trade with the Congo forms only a very low, almost ridiculously small, proportion, something like 70 millions, 60 of which are for rubber. Under these circumstances many Belgians consider

a colonial policy absolutely useless and superfluous. Others reckon that one is never too rich, and that the Congo is so big that there must be money to be made there, and, since it is offered us, it is just as well to accept it. It is probable that if the question of eventual cost were clearly put before them they would hesitate considerably. Others, and, as I have said, especially political men, who, from feelings of thorough loyalty, decline to discuss the abuses committed in the Congo and believe that they have been exaggerated, but who yet know that abuses have been committed, and that they might lead to a conflict between Belgium and England, wish for annexation in order to put an end to these evils and to restrain the autocracy of the King. But the great mass of the public, so far from sharing either of these opinions, have no opinion at all, either as to the Congo or as to colonial policy in general. The question has never been put before the electors at any general election; no deputy has referred to the Congo on the platform, nor to colonial politics at all. The result has been notably that the present Chamber is absolutely without a mandate on the question of the annexation, and as half the senators and deputies must stand for re-election in the month of May next, it is a very natural request to make, in a country the Government of which is strictly parliamentary, that the question should not be settled without having been submitted to the nation by a dissolution. Perhaps in that case those who have opinions on colonial policy and on the question of the Congo, and those particularly who objected to the abuses of the Congo administration before there were any protests in England, will be able to create a public opinion amongst the Belgians and induce them to charge those they elect to Parliament with the duty of making it effective. One only of the three Belgian political parties has been so far called upon to pronounce an opinion on the Congo question, and that is the Socialist party, which counts for no more than one-sixth of the votes in the Chamber. In spite of the efforts of its leader, M. Vandervelde, in favour of annexation, it has pronounced against taking over the Congo. England would be wrong, therefore, in thinking that there is any movement in Belgium for the reform of the Congo abuses, or any serious interest in colonial affairs amongst the larger public, or that the annexation of the Congo by Belgium, even under normal conditions, must result in bringing about reform.

The only thing which is beginning to interest and move the Belgians on this Congo question is the internal political problem which it presents for Belgium, from the point of view of the working of the constitution and the reciprocal rights of King and Parliament. It is on this point that the whole struggle bears. And again, the most essential point of the problem, that of the danger which

threatens the successful working of Parliamentary government in Belgium by investing the King with absolute and uncontrolled power in colonial affairs, has been much less an object of public attention than the question as to the conditions which the King will impose on the annexation, which are in contradiction to the right of annexation pure and simple accorded to Belgium by the convention of 1890, and to the will of the Chamber clearly and unanimously declared in an order of the day of the 14th December, 1906, to annex the Congo only on condition that Belgium shall exercise plenary powers of sovereignty there. Now the annexation treaty which has been agreed upon between the King and the Belgian ministry preserves as an inviolable contract the *Fondation de la Couronne* to which the King has assigned the possession of one-seventh of the Congo territory; its revenue was more than 6 million francs in 1906, and it is calculated to amount in time to more than 20 millions. The revenue is to be administered according to instructions which are to be kept secret by a committee of six persons nominated by the King, whose places are to be filled, after his death, half by co-optation, half by Royal appointment, "the successor to the King on the Belgian throne being considered entirely as representing the founder," that is to say, without being subject to the councils of his ministers. This revenue is to be employed according to the instructions of the founder for objects which mostly relate to the departments of the State, the creation of a navy, of colonial and other schools, of works of public health, and education, subsidies to the Catholic missions in Africa, and, above all, works for city embellishments in Belgium, which have already been begun at Brussels, Laeken, and Ostend. The absolutely sumptuous and at times very extravagant style of these erections has caught the attention of everyone. They are to be carried out to the extent of hundreds of millions of francs, according to vast plans which exist but which the King alone knows. People have every right to say, as they do, that such an institution, which is absolutely contrary to Belgian law (that is not disputed), must in effect limit Belgian sovereignty in Africa, and would constitute in Belgium a State within the State. It would, in addition, give over to the Royal power, which is strictly limited by the Belgian constitution, a means of action and of influence quite incompatible with the proper government of the people by the people. On this point there is a body of public opinion in Belgium, and it is distinctly hostile to the treaty of annexation. It is pretty certain that the treaty will not pass in the form in which it has been presented, and that fresh negotiations will have to be undertaken. It has even been suggested that the result was foreseen and desired beforehand in order to drag the matter

on as long as possible, and to gain one more year. But it is to be feared that the struggle will be concentrated on the question of the unacceptable conditions attached by the King to the annexation and of their consequences to the internal politics of Belgium, and that other still more important questions, such as the necessary reforms in the Congo, the rights of the natives, and the opportunity for a colonial policy, will be lost sight of and decided according to chance circumstances, and that the country will not be called upon to pronounce and say whether or no she will assume the responsibilities devolving upon Belgium with the annexation of the Congo.

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